

PUD continues hunt for Lake Chelan substation site

by Christine Pratt

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WENATCHEE — Chelan County PUD officials may in the coming weeks question property owners above Lake Chelan's north shore to see if they'd be willing to pay more to cover the extra cost and maintenance of putting some of the powerlines underground from a proposed substation.

The possibility arose Monday, when comments by North Shore property owners made it clear to commissioners that none of the three potential sites for the new substation and its associated distribution lines would satisfy everyone — even after 18 months of public outreach.

North Shore resident Michael Gibb made a pitch Monday for the proposed site near the Lake Chelan Municipal Golf Course.

He also urged the PUD to put all new distribution lines underground instead of on poles to keep lake views clear for himself and other property owners who bought land for the views. Unobstructed lake views are a key attraction of new subdivisions also taking shape in the area, he said.

"It's time to go underground on the North Shore," Gibb said, adding that the PUD should cover the extra cost of "undergrounding."

He also suggested that area property owners might contribute via a surcharge on their energy bill or creation of a "Local Improvement District (LID)," which would require property owners within the district to pay more until the PUD recovers its costs.

Andrew Wendell, the PUD's director of customer service, said Monday that utility officials have only recently received build-out cost estimates for each of the three sites.

If commissioners wish, he said, staff could use those cost figures to give North Shore property owners an idea about how much extra they'd have to pay.

That could push the decision-making process on a substation site beyond the current deadline of late March.

The two substations that currently serve the North Shore have reached about 80 percent capacity, Wendell said. Officials are feeling pressured to choose a site and build the third substation to ensure system reliability.

At an estimated \$12.33 million, the golf-course-area site would be the most expensive of the three, but the property owner, Washington Federal Savings, isn't necessarily willing to sell, Wendell said. Developers in the area have already put many of the area distribution lines underground.

A second potential site on Chelan Heights is northwest of the golf course site. It costs the least at \$9.11 million, but is within view of existing properties and has a long access road that would need improvement. It would also require more than four miles of overhead distribution lines.

The third site is just north of the Chelan Heights site on private property owned by area orchardists, the Uhrich family. At an estimated \$12.3 million, the site is the most distant and would require nearly 7 miles of distribution line, but is still relatively rural.

Other North Shore residents vehemently said they wanted neither a substation, with lights that could disturb them at night, nor a view diminished by more distribution lines.

"You guys need to figure out how to underground that distribution line," said Robin Vogel, who owns a vacation house on the North Shore with husband Corky Thoreson. "Those lines are not going through my property and decimating my lake view. This is not negotiable."

Clint Campbell, who owns property near the golf course-area site, said he has long had development plans for his property, which he says has among the area's best potential for recreation. A substation on the golf course-area site would cause "some real economic hardship for us," he said.

Commissioners pointed out that, without a surcharge, the high cost of putting distribution lines underground could be a hard sell to PUD customers in the rest of the county.

"How am I going to deal with a \$3 million additional cost?" Commissioner Garry Arseneault asked the gathered North Shore residents. "How do I justify that to someone in Entiat?"

If most North Shore residents were willing to pay extra, Arseneault said, he'd be more willing to spend the extra money. "You've given us some food for thought that we could look into," he said.

Commissioner Ann Congdon said time is running out and she favored sticking to the current deadline of late March for a site decision. "We've been doing more outreach for 18 months," she said.

The next Chelan substation discussion will likely be during the March 20 commission meeting at the PUD's Wenatchee headquarters, Wendell said.

Distribution lines are lower-voltage and on smaller poles. They carry electricity into individual homes and businesses. Distribution lines get their power from substations, which get their power from higher-voltage transmission lines.

Distribution lines can be placed underground. Transmission lines and substations typically never are.

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